ANIMAL NATURE IN THE AESOPIC FABLES

BY

HELEN RUBY RUSSELL DUDA

B. Ed., Southern Illinois University, 1934

A. M., University of Illinois, 1939

AN ABSTRACT OF A THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
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ANIMAL NATURE IN THE AESOPIC FABLES

The Aesopic fable is narrated as a means to an end. It is usually quite brief, and above all is characterized by "point"—by a dramatic conclusion which, expressly or by implication, is applicable to the realm of human experience. This is the kind of fable which appears in early Greek literature and was subsequently attributed to Aesop. It often deals with what is assumed to be the characteristic conduct of animals, and with analogies drawn between them and men. Folklore, tradition, superstition, and sophistry enter into the shaping of the stories, though all the while they maintain their illustrative value and function. Since the primary purpose was to exemplify human experience, it was sufficient that the actions of the animals described in the fables appear plausible; it was not necessary that they be scientifically accurate.

Natural history was, therefore, only of secondary importance, but critics and editors of fables have often proceeded on the assumption that the narrator intended to be careful of his facts and to make the actions, if not the sentiments attributed to animal protagonists, conform closely to the observed behavior of the species represented. Noteworthy among those who have proceeded on this assumption are Roger L'Estrange, Franciscus de Furia, and Jean Henri Fabre, the naturalist, and at times, J. P. Postgate and Otto Keller. Others—G. E. Lessing, Émile Chambry, and B. E. Perry—agree that the fables frequently deviate from norms of animal conduct that must have been known to both the fabulist and his audience, but excuse the discrepancies as ancillary to the primary purpose of setting forth a moral point. Moreover, the fabulist does not claim to be a naturalist; he uses the animal world for his own practical purposes as a fictional device to produce a desired witty, emotional, or didactic effect. It is the moral point which gives the fable unity and makes of it a work of art. This

inner consistency makes the fable credible, and the moral truth of it transcends the inaccuracies in the descriptions of nature. Animals are used as *personae* instead of men perhaps because a given species may be regarded as the representative of one or more moral qualities. These conventional attributes may be the result of accretions of superstition, folklore, tradition, or of observation, but in any case the character of the animal is accepted as outlined.

It follows, therefore, that accuracy in terms of natural history is not a good criterion for identifying the original or most primitive form of a fable. Keller, for example, believed that oftentimes the Hindu fables are more accurate, and from this inferred that they represent the earlier or original form of the fable; but Theodor Benfey, Otto Gruppe, and Perry have all pointed out that the characteristic differences between Indian and Greek fables correspond to differences in purpose. The Hindu stories are more elaborate, more mystic; they were often told for their intrinsic interest as narrative; the Greek fables are brief, clear, realistic; they were told specifically to illustrate human conduct, from either a didactic or a humorous point of view.

We should remember that in the matter of drawing inferences and associating ideas or images, early Greek thinking —in contrast to modern thinking—is characterized by parataxis.[1] This means the capacity for viewing separately two or more things (or ideas) that might be logically or otherwise connected. In fables, therefore, the narrator, limiting his attention to one thing at a time, was able to point his story straightforward toward the purpose of his fable, without being distracted by the incidental and (from his point of view) irrelevant inconsistencies that might appear if the narrative was considered apart from its primary function—for example, as natural history.

[1]See especially B. E. Perry, "The Early Greek Capacity for Viewing Things Separately." *TAPA* 68 (1937) 403-427.

This dissertation attempts to show in detail how far the fabulist's preoccupation with his story can lead him to overlook or disregard simple natural facts. The fables examined are those ascribed to Aesop either in manuscripts or by ancient authors;[2] the fables by Babrius;[3] and those of Phaedrus,[4] including the *Appendix* preserved by Perotti[5] and ten reconstructions by Postgate from the mediaeval paraphrases.[6]

Animals are considered in the order of their zoological classifications: Crustacea, Insecta, Pisces, Amphibia and Reptilia, Aves, and Mammalia. In the main the arrangement is that of Otto Keller in his work on *Die antike Tierwelt* (2 Bde. Leipzig 1909-1913). Animals whose conduct is described with satisfactory accuracy from the standpoint of natural history in all the fables in which they appear in the collections here studied, have been eliminated from the discussion, which is centered on the fabulist's inaccuracies. Stories are checked for natural accuracy, against facts generally known to be true and against authorities in natural history. Elements of folklore, tradition, and superstition along with the probable reasons for their appearance in each fable are pointed out. Varying degrees of absent-mindedness on the part of the fabulist are found because of his interest in the point of the story. A few examples will illustrate this statement.

Probably the most familiar fable and the one in which

[2]*Fabulae Aesopicae Collectae.* Ed. Carolus Halm. (Bibl. Teubner.). Lipsiae 1868.
Aesopi Fabulae. Rec. Aemilius Chambry. 2 parts. (*Nouvelle Collection de Textes et Documents*). Paris 1925-1926.

[3]*Babrii Fabulae Aesopeae.* Ed. Otto Crusius. Ed. maior. (Bibl. Teubner.). Lipsiae 1897.

[4]*Phaedri Fabulae Aesopiae.* Ed. J. P. Postgate. Oxford 1919.

[5]The *Appendix Perottina* is included in Postgate's edition of Phaedrus.

[6]These fables are selected reconstructions from the paraphrases contained in the manuscript of Ademar, in the Wiessenburg Codex, and in Romulus; they are called *Fabulae Novae* and are included in Postgate's edition, *Phaedri Fabulae Aesopiae.*

the most errors occur is that of the frivolous cicada and the industrious ant. Certainly the cicada must have been very well known to every Greek, but in the fable it appears as a beggar in *winter,* seeking grain from the ant (H 401 = Ch 336). The fabulist ignores either voluntarily or otherwise the facts that there are no adult cicadae in winter, that they do not eat grain, and that it is the ant which robs the singing insect and at the end of the cicada's short life reduces the body to morsels for his own granaries. In two other fables the truth of the nature of the ant is admitted (H 294 = Ch 242), and there is assumed a different diet (dew) for the cicada (Ch 279; Ph III 16); but the fable of the frolicsome cicada and the sober ant is so well known that even to listeners of today the characteristics of those insects are established and no question arises concerning the facts. The most conspicuous evidence of disregard for natural history is represented in the fables of the carnivorous cow, goat, and sheep (Ph I 5) and the bull that attended a feast of mutton (H 262 = Ch 212). No excuse can be made for the fabulist here; these fables can be the results of only a deliberate neglect of animal nature because of the narrator's interest in the point of the story, which was unaffected by the diet of the animals. On the other hand, lack of advanced study in natural history could be responsible for the general belief in the generation of wasps from decaying animal matter (*App. P.* 29), though Aristotle, admitting a belief in the spontaneous generation of some insects (*H. A.* V, 551a 1-10), implies a denial in the case of the wasp (*H. A.* V, 554b 22 - 555a 12); the longevity of the deer (B 46; B 95 = H 243 = Ch 200); and the conception of the singing nightingale as the female of the species (B 212; H 10 = Ch 9; B 12), though legend here is accepted and commingled with fable.

In every case, the matter of concern was not natural accuracy in narrating animal behavior but the ethical or philosophical inference placed upon the actions. The animal characters are merely pegs to support a story with a meaning. The Aesopic fable is a narrative not for amusement

or for information in natural history but for utility. So successful is this purpose that a large number of fables are accepted by people of today, in their original form without being questioned as to the accuracy of what they imply. Many fables also have a renewed life at the present time through the media of familiar phrases, similes, and proverbs, which have enriched literature and living.

VITA

Helen Ruby Russell Duda was born in Anna, Illinois, March 17, 1912. She was graduated with valedictory honors from the Anna-Jonesboro Community High School in 1929. She then attended Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, Illinois, where she studied Latin with Miss Helen A. Baldwin; she was graduated with the degree of Bachelor of Education in 1934. Her teaching career began in 1931 and is now fifteen years long; she has taught in the Anna Public Schools, in the Arthur, Harrisburg (as head of the Latin Department), and Urbana High Schools. During this time she also attended the University of Illinois and received the degree of Master of Arts in Classics in 1939, with a minor in French. Thereafter, she began further preparations for the work leading to the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Classics, fulfilling an ambition which appeared literally at the beginning of her first acquaintance with the delights of reading and of teaching.

Her graduate work has been done with Professors H. V. Canter, W. A. Oldfather, B. E. Perry, and Alexander Turyn in the Classics and with Professors D. H. Carnahan and S. F. Will in the French Department. She is a member of Eta Sigma Phi and of Sigma Pi Rho.

In August of 1946 she was married to Walter B. Duda, Director of Music in the Urbana Public Schools.